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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of the basic course in speech should be to investigate oral communication rather than public speaking. Fundamental to understanding oral communication is some understanding of the oral mind, that operates when orality is the primary means of expression. Since narrative invites action rather than leisurely analysis, the oral mind responds best to narrative structure. Educators can learn much about modern (electronic) communication by isolating the oral mind, that part of the intellect which was responsible for cultural developments before the literate era. Examining research with illiterate peasants suggests that the oral mind functions very well throughout life, and probably is the primary means of learning until its experiential mode is replaced with a metaphorical one through education. The oral mind, however, in spite of this mode shift, is alive and well, and is surviving in spite of literacy. Furthermore, the fact that narrative not only entertains, but instructs and persuades, demonstrates that stories function at multiple levels, and that the public speaker is a poet who doesn't know it. Finally, because all humans and their communication can be regarded as deserving of respect, oral communication must address the whole person. Basic speech pedagogy should incorporate narrative structure as a major means of organizing a speech. Another reason to incorporate stories into an oral communication class is that stories involve memorable language. An investigation of stories reveals much about the functioning of the oral mind and about what is engaging and memorable in public speaking. (Fifteen references are attached.) (PRA)

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Understanding the Oral Mind: Implications for Speech Education.

by

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Remember the Alamo.

When the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking split from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1915, the reason for the debate and split had to do with the connection between writing and speaking. Writing skills had so controlled the curricula that one English teacher was able to ask "If a man can write, can he not also speak? Does not the greater encompass the lesser?" (Gray, 1964, p. 11). This anonymous speaker was perfectly comfortable with the idea that oral communication was a decidely inferior means of communication. The speaker had tapped a sentiment, still with us to this day, which says that skills with the written word define communication skills (Ong, 1977), and even more to the point, skill with the written word defines intelligence.

The founders of the Speech Communication Association felt differently. The seventeen men who provided the leadership for the formation of a Speech Association knew that oral languages were taught long before written languages, and they knew that there were fundamental differences between communication which relies upon the spoken word rather than upon the written word (Gray, 1964). However, the fundamental differences between oral and written communication seems not to have greatly affected departments of speech. What may be happening in many departments of speech communication is that teachers are

teaching the most effective way for students to read their essays. What is more likely, however, is that speech teachers are trying to force material which ought to be written into an oral form (Haynes, n.d.).

Many have argued that the electronic media have transformed our world into a post-literate society--a society which may have more to do with the pre-literate world than the literate world. What remains is to decide what departments of speech communication have to offer the post-literate society.

For the past thirty or forty years classical scholars have asked questions about how the invention of writing has affected the thinking or the process of thinking of human beings. They have asked whether and how societies which have relied exclusively upon the spoken word differ from those societies which have learned to write (Havelock, 1986; Luria, 1968). The answer almost always is that there is a fundamental and profound difference in the ways of thinking, and the question for communication disciplines is how to address these differences in our research programs and in our classrooms.

In the following paper I will present a rationale for grounding the Basic Course in Speech in an oral tradition or narrative. I will argue that the primary goal of the Basic Course ought to be investigating oral communication rather than public speaking. Fundamental to understanding oral

communication is some understanding of the Oral Mind, the mind that operates when orality is the primary means of expression.

Understanding the Oral Mind.

Without a means of writing, a simple act such as going to the grocery store becomes a test of memory. Without a grocery list, the shopper must somehow remember all the items needed for the food pantry. Pre-literate cultures had to solve similar, but infinitely more complex, problems which had to do with remembering the keys to cultural survival. How does the clan survive a drought? A blizzard? Who were our ancestors? To whom do we owe debts? What do we consider important? As someone put it, "There is nothing in oral memory which is trivial and useless."

Memory.

Havelock tells us that the mother of the Muses was Mnemosume or Rememberance. The Muses were typically invoked by artists and poets as their source of inspiration, or even, perhaps, the voices for whom the poet spoke. The role of the Muses and their mother, Rememberance, provides some idea of the role of the arts in oral societies [1]. The arts were used for rememberance: What was important to remember was incorporated into the arts of narrative, poetry and dance (Havelock, 1986, p. 72). The word "narrative" is derived from Latin word, gnarus, (knowing, acquainted with, expert, skillful, etc.) and narro (tell or relate) and comes

to Latin by way of the Sanskrit gna (to know). The same word yields the Greek word meaning knowable or known (White, 1980, n. 2). Thus, even the etymology of narrative suggests its close ties to knowledge and remembering[2].

For some reason narrative structure plays into the strengths of the brain's ability to remember, a fact that mnemonists have used to their advantage (Luria, 1968). In The Mind of a Mnemonist. Luria details the life of one S, a man who relatively late in life discovered his gift, or his curse, of a nearly infallible memory. Luria reported that S performed his mnenomic feats by thinking exclusively in images and turning everything into narrative form. One particularly interesting example had to do with S's memorizing a meaningless mathematical formula. S assigned a specific image to each symbol (the square-root symbol became a house, for instance) and each image was connected to the previous one by a narrative thread. Thus, tying meaningless mathematical symbols into a narrative structure made remembrance possible. Similar techniques are standard fare in most memory workshops.

Narrative Structure.

Narrative structure formed the basis of memory. Much of the important lore of a society was incorporated into stories. Remembering how to survive a drought may not be easy, but even a child can remember the story of how

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great-grandfather survived the drought a hundred seasons ago.

Perhaps our brains are wired so that they naturally respond to narrative structure (Restak, 1988); perhaps narrative structure is an evolutionary trait in that clans with the ability to remember survived and those without the ability to remember perished, so that what remained were general rules for remembering rather than the specific skills. For whatever reasons, narrative became an important tool in the struggle for survival. Whatever information a society needed which was incorporated into the structure of a narrative was easily remembered and retrieved.

Action.

Narrative is immediate; its forte is action. A technical definition of narrative is that narrative is a series of "temporally ordered clauses" (Labov, 1972, p. 360). A less formal definition is that a story is someone doing something to someone else for some reason, and so narrative is rooted in action. Action is also the hallmark of narrative language.

Havelock, Ong and others have made the point very well that one of the key features in the change from an oral to a literate community is the change of focus from the action of the narrative--people (or personifications) doing--to the abstract detachment of the essay and the invention of mental constructs.

A corollary to development of mental constructs is a heavy reliance on connective verbs, i.e., the verb to be in all of its forms. Writing about constructs almost demands the use of "is," and the essay is typically about a construct. It is almost impossible to write a paper such as this without using "is." Mental constructs involve metaphorical thinking, a topic which will be discussed below.

An essay on honesty would almost certainly include the statement: *Honesty* is the best policy. Honesty becomes a construct, an invention of a mind which is capable of abstract thinking.

The same theme handled (indirectly) in oral cultures would probably include the statement: An honest man always prospers. More likely, however, is that the oral culture would fashion a story showing a man *doing* honest things and prospering because he did them (Havelock, 1983).

Narrative is action: it invites action. It invites the doing of something rather than its leisurely analysis. Narrative features people or people-like things in action. Narrative celebrates the doer, rather than the thinker, and our current fascination with experiental education harkens back to our narrative roots.

Rule One: The oral mind responds best to narrative structure.

Language and the Oral Mind.

Most researchers have described three eras in human development. The first is a pre-literate era, which is at least several hundred thousand years long. The second, the literate era, is a much shorter one of a few thousand years, depending upon one's definition of writing. The post-literate era is only decades long, during which electronic media have become a primary means of communication (Jamieson, 1989).

Our interest in the pre-literate era is likely of a result of the idea that electronic media are more closely allied with oral communication and the pre-literate era than with written communication of the literate era. My thesis is that we have much to learn about electronic communication by isolating the oral mind, that part of our intellect which was responsible for cultural developments before the literate era.

Luria (1976) investigated cognitive development by comparing illiterate peasants in the Soviet Union with villagers who had at least some education. His results show that "(T)he significance of schooling lies not just in the acquisition of new knowledge, but in the creation of new motives and formal modes of discursive verbal and logical thinking divorced from immediate practical experience" (p. 133). I will not only argue that what Luria calls "immediate practical experience" is in fact narrative

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structure, but that our reliance upon narrative reasoning has not disappeared because we have become literate.

Luria used several standard psychological tests in his investigation. He asked subjects to look at a series of objects, for instance, a saw, a hammer, a log, and a hatchet. The subjects were asked to decide which object did not belong in the group. Luria reports that subjects who had almost any schooling at all had no trouble deciding that the log was not a tool, the category which described the other items. Yet what is even more interesting than that specific finding is that illiterate peasants would group the four items into a narrative. For instance, one sixty-year old peasant said " They all fit here! The saw has to saw the log, the hammer has to hammer it, and the hatchet has to chop it. And if you want to chop the log up really good, you need the hammer. You can't take any of these things away. There isn't any you don't need" (p. 58).

Luria then attempted to force his subjects to adopt a classification system by asking them to suppose that "dog" had been substituted for "log." One peasant then reluctantly agreed that the dog probably didn't belong, but he then added "If it was a mad dog, you could beat it with a hammer and a hatchet and it would die." While Luria calls this persistence "practical and useful," it seems to me that what his illiterate subjects do is to construct a narrative which includes all of the items of whatever kind, even to

the point of substituting items if necessary. Literate subjects, of course, had no trouble in abstract, categorical thinking.

Luria got the same results when he asked his subjects to work with syllogisms. His illiterate subjects were incapable of deductive reasoning, preferring instead to rely upon practical, everyday knowledge. The illiterate subjects were incapable of relating the premises of a syllogism to one another. They saw them "as a series of isolated, concrete, and logically unrelated judgments that yield no particular inference and are thus not a means of deduction (p. 106).

Metaphorical Thinking.

With any schooling at all, Luria's subjects had no trouble with categorical thinking, with handling simple syllogisms, and with the troublesome problems of definitions. It seems that the very act of learning to read let subjects engage in what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call metaphorical thinking. Lakoff and Johnson argue that from a basic vocabulary of "literal," i.e., experiental, ways of thinking, we have expanded our vocabulary into "figurative, poetic, colorful, or fanciful thought and language" (p. 13), which is to say metaphorical thought.

One of Lakoff and Johnson's first examples is the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor. WAR is seen as a first-hand experiental concept, and another concept is then

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metaphorically linked to the first by the linguistic symbol for metaphor--the connective verb is. Thus debaters "take sides," "defend a position," and "attack their opponents." Language thereby grows and concepts are abstracted from their experiental roots. Jamieson shows a very direct connection between "war" and "rhetoric" when she says that our English word "polemic" is derived from a Greek word for war.[3]

Luria's illiterate subjects had a great deal of difficulty in defining an abstract concept such as freedom. "I've heard that have women have got their freedom, but that's all I know. It means that the landowners oppressed them before but now they've escaped from their misery" (Luria, 1976, p. 88). This peasant relied upon a narrative, while more literate subjects attempted to define concepts more metaphorically.

While true illiterates are a rarity in the Western world and metaphorical thinking is an undisputed fact of language, the question is whether the oral mind ceases to function once a person becomes literate. More likely, the question is to what extent does the oral mind function in different contexts.

It seems likely that the oral mind functions very well throughout life, and probably is the primary means of learning until we consciously learn to replace its experiental mode with a metaphorical mode.

I remember an experience in graduate school when our class was discussing the results of some experimental study. Several of the newer graduate students insisted upon drawing upon their personal experience as a measure of truth, which prompted our instructor to note that the difference between a graduate student and an undergraduate student was that an undergraduate measures truth in terms of personal experience, while truth to a graduate student meant consistency with at least one published study.

The same sentiment is an important characteristic of Fisher's narrative paradigm, where rationality is defined in terms of coherence and probability, which is to say "experience."

Coles notes the same tendency in medical schools:

> "(F)irst-year medical students often obtain textured and subtle autobiographical accounts from patients and offer them to others with enthusiasm and pleasure, whereas fourth-year students or house officers are apt to present cryptic, dryly condensed, and, yes, all too 'structured' presentations, full of abbreviations, not to mention medical or psychiatric jargon. No question: the farther one climbs the ladder of medical education, the less time one has for relaxed, storytelling reflection (Cole, 1989, p. 24).

Thus, the problem is likely to be one which involves the "expert community," rather than one which involves

literacy, per se. This provides substantial evidence to the charge that experts think differently from non-experts, and that the real problem in policy matters is the dialogue between experts and non-experts.

Rule two: The oral mind is alive and well, surviving in spite of literacy.

Multi-dimensional purposes.

A typical speech text book says that there are three different kinds of speeches: the informative speech, the persuasive speech, and the entertaining speech. The speech to inform, the speech to persuade, and the speech to entertain have formed the bulwark of the speech communication business since the publication of its first textbook. What the ancients knew that the writers of textbooks seem to have forgotten is that nobody wants to listen to anything which is not first of all entertaining.

Narrative structure solves two problems. First, narrative solves the problem of memory in that stories are rememberable, and, second, stories solve the problem of making persuasion entertaining. Stories provide, first and foremost, some kind of entertainment value. The story may also argue a point; it may even provide information, but it always entertains. Every playwright knows that regardless of how profound the message, a play without entertainment value is doomed to failure.

Narrative, however, does far more than merely entertain. Narrative also instructs and persuades. Jospeh Campbell (1988) shows how myths incorporate and pass on the values of a society. Myths tell the stories of what is important, of what is valued in a culture.

Rule Three: Stories function at multiple levels.

In language, pleasing in its parts.

In addition to the narrative structure, oral memory relied heavily upon poetry (Havelock, 1986), particularly poetry in its more old-fashioned sense of words with rhyme and meter. Almost everyone knows that the Iliad and the Odyssey were originally oral poems; yet to hold the two large volumes in one's hands, to marvel at the complexity and intricacy of the stories, is to be truly impressed by the mind's ability to retain and use narrative poetry.

Peggy Noonan, a speechwriter who has gained considerable fame in an otherwise obscure profession, says that while she is working on a speech, her constant companions are books of poetry. "I would read poetry and biographies, the former because the rush of words would help loosen the rocks that clogged the words in my head . . . I always kept Stephen Vincent Binet's John Brown's Body, the Bible, (especially the Psalms), and Ezra Pound's Cantos, although I don't think I ever understood a one' (1990, p. 74).

Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1988) quotes Northrop Frye, an important literary critic, regarding the value of studying poetry: "(T)here is the sense of wit and heightened intelligence, resulting from seeing disciplined words marching along in metrical patterns and in their inevitably right order" (p. 18).

Poets deal in words, and so do public speakers. Poetry is a powerful tool of rememberance, and it is far too powerful to be ignored. It is far too powerful to be relegated to simple writing exercises. Poetry belongs in public speaking classes far more than it belongs in writing classes.

Rule Four: The public speaker is a poet who doesn't know it.

Literate/Scientific v. Oral/Poetic

One of Walter Fisher's first distinctions, and a major part of his argument, is that to the pre-Socratic Greeks--and incidentally to the pre-literate Greeks, for the Greek phonetic alphabet was invented or developed somewhere around 700 BC (Havelock, 1983)--there was a separation between the words <u>logos</u> and <u>mythos.</u> Logos is probably best translated as "word" and yet has a variety of meanings such as wisdom, knowledge, and reason. Fisher contends that logos meant "story, reason, rationale, conception, discourse, thought" (p.5).

Logos would have applied to the thinking of the pre-literate Greeks more in the sense of what we would call Myth. White (1980) says that story is a means of translating a way of knowing into a way to telling. Among all of the various meanings of logos, there is a sense that each translates a way of knowing into words or discourse, which is a way of telling. To the preliterate mind there was only one way of knowing and the best way of telling then became "myth," which is a specialized kind of story. This idea is finding its way into some of our textbooks, as mythos, is taking its place alongside the three more familiar means of persuasion (Osborn and Osborn, 1991).

According to Havelock, once writing became common, the ways of thinking changed. It no longer became necessary to work with the limitation of the oral mind. Philosophers became freer to extend the range and kind of discourse, and the constructs became more and more abstract. Such a shift in thinking raised questions of kinds of thinking, ways of thinking, and rules of thinking, all the while retaining the philosopher's interest in Truth.

The invention of writing lead to two kinds of knowledge, one associated with the old, mythos, and the other associated with the new, logos. These are distinctions we maintain to this very day and the distinctions have become institutionalized in the educational system. The University with which I am

associated has a school of Natural and Social Sciences and a school of Fine Arts. The two operate in entirely different intellectual mileaus. They operate with entirely different ways of knowing. They operate with entirely different ways of thinking.

Logos became associated with the literate world and became the term used to describe philosophical, technical and scientific discourse. The set of rules concerning logos provide the framework for Fisher's rational-world paradigm. The rational-world paradigm defines expert thinking, abstract thinking, and thinking which is designed to answer questions of fact.

According to Fisher, the philosophical grounding of the rational-world paradigm is epistemology, the branch of philosophy which is concerned with ways of knowing. It is the branch of philosophy which asks questions about what we know, how we know it, and what constitutes truth. What we teach as modern science is an answer to the questions raised by epistemologists. Science is not only a method for arriving at truth, it is the method for arriving at truth.

In contrast to the rational-world paradigm is Fisher's narrative paradigm. It is not nearly so simple as a revisionist theory of mythos or a rediscovery of the ancients and orality. Rather it is much closer in spirit to modern systems thinking as described by Capra in The Turning Point, a text mentioned by Fisher. One of the points of

systems thinking is a reintegration of persons, which has come to be called holistic thinking. Fisher says "(o)ne cannot predict the outcome of the arguments, but one can hope for a concept of logos that approximates that of the ancients. Theirs was a concept that regarded all humans and their communication as not irrational and as deserving respect" (pp. 10-11)

Rule Five: Oral communication must address the whole person.

Conclusions and Recommendations.

A paradigm shift usually refers to a revolution in human thought, which involves leaving the old behind. Copernicus' universe left Ptolemy's as a footnote in science. Priestly's discovery of oxygen left only a quaint term, phylogiston, with which to amuse seventh graders. Darwin's evolution left only a handful of die-hard creationists around to carry on the battle.

The case for the narrative paradigm is not so clear, for obviously we cannot abandon the rational-world paradigm. What should happen is that the narrative paradigm can point the way toward a renewed emphasis and interest in the beauty of the spoken word. The irony of oral communication is that the modern teacher of public speaking is not one who makes his or her living by public speaking. The modern college teacher lives by the written word, as writing and research are the tools of promotion and tenure (Smith, 1990).

A Case for Storytelling.

There is probably no single speaking skill which is as easy to learn, which has as many opportunities to do and which incorporates all the features of the narrative paradigm as simple storytelling. Fisher saw the narrative paradigm as a means of "reintegrating" a fragmented personality and a culture. In his critique of higher education, Smith (1990) makes much the same point. He argues that many problems in higher stem from "the impersonality of the university, (and) the fragmentation of learning" (p. 285). Early in his text, in a very interesting chapter on teaching, Smith proposes a fairly radical notion of holistic learning. He proposes that what we call learning in higher education should take some very different forms. Smith suggests that we educate the "true person." He calls for more emphasis on, first, aesthetic sensibilities, "which means an attachment to those aspects of human experience we call the arts: music, poetry, literature, crafts, painting, sculpture. Any individuals insensitive to this range of human experience are, to a degree, emotionally impoverished." Second, he calls for "some vision of higher things, of a realm beyond the immediate existence, beyond the material world." Smith speaks of the Greek agape as one of the most familiar metaphysical concepts. Third, Smith calls for "instruction in courage (and) . . . the demonstration of courage."

Fourth, a "proper respect and concern for the physical body," but a concern more aesthetic than athletic. Finally, he calls for the experience "which deals with festivals and celebrations" (pp. 202-208).

I have already shown how story or narrative is tied to the Muses, or what we typically call artistic experiences. Joseph Campbell (1988) has shown how myth and story are "literature of the spirit" (p.3), and while storytellers may not be able to demonstrate courage, they are certainly able to do the next best thing, which is telling stories about courage.

Concern for the physical body presents and interesting application of storytelling, for Smith refers to Stanislavsky and Artaud, both directors and acting coaches, in his examples about aesthetic physical ability, rather than athletic physical ability. Many storytellers come from an acting tradition, where dance and mime are important elements of training. Finally, storytelling lends itself to the Festival and celebration that Smith speaks of. The popularity of the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennesse each fall and the growing number of Festivals throughout the world are evidence of the worth of storytelling festivals..

The accomplished storyteller intuitively knows or has learned much about the oral mind. The accomplished storyteller knows much about organization, about action,

about rhythm, about interest and suspense, which are all the things that make a public speaking event a memorable and an engaging one.

The simple exercise of storytelling encompasses a number of features which are characteristics of good speaking, and a corresponding investigation of narrative will illuminate much of the technical literature on the narrative paradigm. Embracing the narrative paradigm almost requires a study of stories and storytelling.

One of the changes which should be made in response to the narrative paradigm is to incorporate narrative structure as a major means of organizing a speech. Communication teachers and scholars have two perfectly good tools at their disposal to do this. One is Burke's Pentad and the other is Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis. Both are used far more for rhetorical criticism and analysis than they are for rhetorical construction, although Cragan and Shields have shown how successfully Fantasy Themes can be used to construct speeches (Cragan and Shields, 1981).

The who, what, where, when, and why approach, which Burke and Bormann both share, emphasize that people are doing the acting.

Another reason to incorporate stories into an oral communication class is that stories involve memorable language. Good stories incorporate rhythm and meter; good stories incorporate action verbs rather than static

descriptions. Good stories invite action from the speaker or teller in the form of gestures, movement, and audience contact.

An investigation of stories can not only tell us a lot about the functioning of the oral mind and orality in general, it can also tell us a lot about what is engaging and memorable in public speaking experiences.

Much of the interest in investigating these kinds of questions has to do with the impact of television on expression and thinking. Television is not a literary medium; television is far closer to the old oral culture than it is to the newer literary cultures. Jamieson (1988), commenting on President Reagan's innovative use of television, said, "Reagan's oral prose signals that his speech was scripted to be seen and heard. Where most of his predecessors constructed speeches suitable for the print media of the nineteenth century, Reagan's was written to be spoken and seen through the electronic media of the twentiethn century" (p. 165).

The roots and traditions of the speech communication field far pre-date historical cultures. The roots of our field go back to the first person who was able to think out loud. There are important lessons we can learn from studying these ancient traditions and there may be important lessons for the future as well.

Footnotes

1. According to Durant (1966) "There were nine Muses to inspire artists and poets: Clio for history, Euterpe for lyric poetry accompanied by the flute, Thalia for comic drama and idyllic poetry, Melpomene for tragedy, Terpsichore for choral dance and song, Erato for love verse and mimicry; Polymnia for hymns, Urania for astronomy, Caliope for epic poetry (p. 186)."

2. According to Jamieson, memory was an important attribute of classical rhetoric as late as 85 B.C. in Rhetorica ad Herennium, which, she claims, is "misattributed to Cicero. . . . Memory also receives treatment in Quintillian. By the eighteenth century the canon had all but disappeared from the rhetoric texts, a fact that lead to its identification as the 'lost canon (p. 22).' "

3. Jamieson takes this argument in a slightly different direection, as she devotes a chapter (3) to "cooler" metaphors for rhetoric in the "electronic age."

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